Agent Performance in Programming

Agents who think of themselves as technologists and who merely impose preconceived solutions to problems limit the scope of their programs

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THE EXTENT to which Extension programming is effective in a specific geographic location (county, area, district, or state) is largely determined by the Extension worker whose job responsibilities place him in direct contact with local people. The actions taken by an Extension agent whose responsibilities are manifest at this operational level are the key to effective programs. The purpose of this article is to relate research findings and principles relative to human behavior that have an effect upon the programming efforts of Extension agents. Primary emphasis will be given to factors associated with the Extension organization, the local society, and human behavior.

Findings from a Kentucky study[1] support the thesis that agents' programming effectiveness is greatly influenced by the scope of their personal environment relative to the local society and the organization. Agents rated high in programming effectiveness by their supervisors had a tendency to give more consideration to the *total situation* affecting people of their county than did those who were rated low. Low rated agents tended to limit their programs to farm people and the subject matter to agriculture; high rated agents felt that the program should involve people in addition to farm families

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and that the needed subject matter extended to areas in addition to agriculture.

The attributes of local people who would be affected by a program were considered by more of the agents rated most effective than those rated low. More of the high rated group tended to consider that people *would* take action, that desirable changes in people's behavior *would* be brought about by increasing their understanding of the situation, and that the attitude of the people was a factor which must be considered. As expressed by one agent, "Before this new program could be developed and I could get people to take action, I would have to change their attitudes toward the activity as well as increase their understanding of the major issue." The low rated agents tended to limit their consideration of the behavior of people to the extent that the people involved *could* take action. A common response was, "I would present the facts and let them take whatever action they desired. If they didn't want the program, even though they needed it, I would drop it."

FUNCTION OF AGENTS

The major function of the county agent position is to provide for the development and implementation of an informal educational program with local people. This function is viewed as a meeting place of forces inherent in the local society and forces associated with the Service which result in maintaining or bringing about desirable changes in people and their society. However, sociologists and anthropologists[3] emphasize that oftentimes when changes (either desirable or undesirable) are introduced in a society conflicting forces (which may have been latent) become very active. The effects of such forces were reflected by Kentucky agents.

Most agents indicated that they were employees of the Land Grant University and that their job was to interpret research and to develop programs that contributed to the improvement of the total society. For programs which were concerned primarily with agricultural production, the demands of the organization were usually given priority over conflicting demands of local people. Most agents indicated that research findings and established programs of the Service provided a dominant force stronger than the resistance to change which local people had developed. In response to an incident relative to a livestock production program, one agent's in-

[2] Ronald Lippitt *et al., The Dynamics of Planned Change* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958).
[3] Edward H. Spicer, *Human Problems in Technological Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1952).

sponse typified the feeling of most agents: "I know that what that group of farmers wants to do could make them money for a year or two, but research shows that in the long run, they would be out of business if we did not get this program carried out."

Agents also indicated that total-resource type programs activated many more forces in the local society than did the production type programs. The agents described and justified action they felt appropriate for comparable incidents essential to each of these two types of programs. For the total-resource type, most of the action was justified in terms dealing with forces described as (1) people opposing the program, (2) *wants* and *needs* of the Extension Council or committees of local people to whom the agents looked for support, (3) the power structure or persons living in the county who could legitimize the described action, and (4) the wants and needs of people to be directly affected by the program.

For production type programs, most agents limited their justification to the *needs* of people to be directly affected by the program and the recommendation of the relevant subject-matter department. Most agents agreed that the county agent today and in the future will be concerned with total-resource type programs. As vividly described by one of the highest rated agents, "Our programs must continue to be concerned with problems of farm families, but we must also help in other selected areas." Or, as said by another agent, "We must include the total resources (available to an area) in planning our programs of today." However, many agents indicated that their effectivness in such programs was limited because of the lack of available, applicable information needed to implement the more complex programs.

Mention was frequently made of the need for full support of leading citizens in effecting these programs. As described by one agent, "I know that the boys at the University are right, but they don't have to live and work with the people who are opposed to the programs." Responses indicated that forces in the local society and those associated with the Extension organization are to be reckoned with in the county agent position.

ACTION OF AGENTS

Authorities on human behavior state that there is not a simple formula that describes why people act and react as they do.[4] However, it is generally agreed that any person is a choosing individual and his response to a situation is based upon his interpretation of

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[4] Douglas H. Fryer *et al., Developing People in Industry* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 59.

his needs. For example, findings from the famous Hawthorne Studies[5] indicate that the behavior of employees in an industry was based upon needs which had been acquired through association with others in the organization. Their action was either toward a goal which seemed to satisfy a personal need or away from conditions which were interpreted as threatening or depriving the employees of satisfying these needs.

Clegg[6] found that the agents' personal sources of motivation were largely associated with factors external to the organization. He identified such sources of positive motivation as (1) positive interest in doing work, (2) perceived successes which have the effect of raising the level of aspiration, and (3) a feeling of obligation to people at the level of operations. Factors which interferred with or hindered performance were associated generally with the internal relationships within the organization.

The study of Kentucky county agents further supports the thesis that an individual's course of action is influenced by forces relative to his social needs. When asked to relate an incident in which a high level of personal satisfaction was realized from their programming experiences, most agents freely chose and described satisfying situations which afforded them the opportunity to achieve what they had set out to do. When agents were asked "why" these situations were satisfying, descriptions were based largely on the desirable effects that the situation had upon clientele. For example, in describing a successful organization for a rural electrification program one agent said, "I knew what this program would mean to those people. I had studied by oil lamp, too. After it was completed I would say to myself, 'I had a little bit to do with helping these people get the electricity which they were really enjoying'."

All Kentucky agents interviewed identified situations that resulted in dissatisfaction from their programming experiences. Situations which hindered personal achievement and those which contributed to undesirable relationships with the people in the county were most frequently mentioned. Either failure on the job or not seeing the results of good work was mentioned by about two out of three. As described by one agent, "The program failed. We could see the need for the program but the people would not participate because they were just afraid to do something different than they

[5] F. J. Rothlesburger and W. J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

[6] Denzil O. Clegg, "The Motivation of County Administrators in the Cooperative Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963), p. 157. See also Denzil O. Clegg, "Work as a Motivator," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Fall, 1963), 141-48.

and been doing." Other agents attributed their dissatisfaction to undesirable relations with local people, the policies and administration of the organization, the lack of status in the organization, or improper recognition for good work.

Attitudes Affect Behavior

The attitudes individuals have toward their work are thought of as learned characteristics which contribute to a consistent trend in behavior relative to performing their job. Both positive and negative attitudes are formed that influence behavior. Kentucky agents felt that satisfying experiences from their programming efforts contributed several positive attitudinal effects upon their behavior. Increased personal confidence or security was mentioned by nearly two-thirds of the agents as satisfying experiences. Other desirable attitudinal effects considered by nearly one-half of the respondents, in rank order, were (1) personal growth, (2) professional improvement, and (3) a favorable attitude toward the Service.

Dissatisfying experiences were described generally as having some undesirable attitudinal effect. Nearly half of the agents identified not receiving satisfaction from work as contributing to a reduction in personal confidence and security. About four out of ten indicated that not satisfying this need resulted in a negative attitude toward some part of the Service.

It was noted, however, that when agents interpreted dissatisfying experiences in relation to their long-time goals, the dissatisfying experiences did contribute to personal needs. Nearly half of the agents indicated that, in the long-run, they had become more competent agents as a result of learning how to deal with negative forces in the society in which they live and work. About one-third felt that on a long-time basis dissatisfying experience had a positive attitudinal effect primarily because local people or members of the Service continued to support them even though they were unable to deal with the negative forces they described as contributors to personal dissatisfaction.

Program Affects Responses

The advancement of the educational level of people, the increased need and use of scientific knowledge and technology, the increased interdependence among Extension's clientele, and the increase in governmental programs have resulted in the involvement of agents and local people in programs which range from relatively simple agricultural production problems to those which are complex and interdisciplinary in nature.

The Kentucky study indicates that the types of problems affect the course of action taken. Agents had a tendency to be organizationally oriented when dealing with agricultural production type problems. But, when giving leadership to programs based upon public affairs problems, agents were much more sensitive to the demands of the local society. Most agents felt that both types of programs were part of their job responsibilities. However, action described as appropriate for the agricultural production type program was based primarily on disseminating information which was recommended by the Land-Grant University. The needs of people and forces inherent in the local society were identified by about three out of ten respondents.

For the public affairs type program agents identified an array of factors influencing their course of action. The wants and needs of leaders with whom they worked closely were identified by most agents. This factor was closely followed, in rank order, by (1) objectives and policies of the Service, (2) people opposing the program, and (3) influential groups and individuals who live and work in the area.

As agents make decisions relative to their programming responsibilities they become sensitive to forces in the local society to a much greater extent when they are involved in interdisciplinary programs than when they are concerned with production problems.

INTERPRETATION OF JOB

In the Kentucky study, almost four out of ten agents were organizationally oriented—that is, they consistently chose a course of action in which the demands of the organization were chosen over the demands of the local society. About one-fourth were local society oriented. This group took action in which the demands of the local society were considered over the demands of the organization. Others vacillated between the organization's and the local society's demands by not taking any action or by shifting responsibility for the decision.

These differences in orientation can be viewed as an expression of differences in interpetation of forces associated with programming responsibilities. For example, more of the local society oriented agents had a tendency to interpret policies as flexible, to feel that open type supervision was essential for effective programming, or to base their decisions primarily on the local situation. But more of the agents who were organization oriented had a tendency to relate elements of county program objectives to the objectives of the state program, to interpret policy as rigid, to base their decisions on

the authority of their superior, or to feel that close supervision was essential for effective programming.

These responses show that agents are confronted with forces from the organization and the local society and that there are differences in agents' interpretation of these forces. These interpretations provide the basis for the course of action taken in program development and implementation.

As the agent performs tasks associated with the programming function, he is placed in direct contact with members of the organization, local people, and elements of their environments. His job extends his environment from his personal life to elements closely associated with the organization and local people, their resources, problems, wants, needs, and aspirations. The organization becomes an extension of individuals making choices and behaving on the basis of their understanding of their environment and needs.[7]

It is within this extended environment that the agent encounters factors upon which he makes decisions and takes action. As indicated by Argyrus,[8] an employee of an organization develops his own "grand strategy" from a specific situation as exemplified in his abilities, needs, and goals. He may take action to attain a specific goal or he may feel he is compelled to take action in order to avoid a circumstance which he feels is in conflict with a desired end. Nevertheless, his action is based upon his interpretation of the situation and how it affects him.

A study of Wisconsin agents by Wilkening[9] supports this idea. Wilkening concluded that the agent's course of action was influenced by his interpretation of local interest, although these interests were not necessarily compatible with his "ideal" definition of his role or job. He suggested that the extent to which an agent feels he fulfills his role responsibilities varies with his personal orientation (whether with those with whom he works or with those in superior positions) and with the degree of control over his activities as indicated by his status (relative position) in the organization.[10]

IMPLICATIONS

Since Extension programs are primarily developed and executed to bring about desirable changes in people, Extension agents should

[7] John M. Pfiffner and Frank P. Sherwood, *Administrative Organization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), p. 386.

[8] Chris Argyrus, *Personality and Organization: The Conflict Between System and the Individual* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 20.

[9] Eugene A. Wilkening, *The County Extension Agent in Wisconsin,* Research Bulletin 203 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1957), p. 47.

[10] *Ibid.,* p. 49.

view all their programming activities as a means of reaching the objectives of the organization. Their position becomes the meeting place of forces inherent in the organization and in the local society. Agents' actions relative to programming are a manifestation of their personal interpretation of the forces encountered from these two sources. Such interpretations are largely influenced by their sensitivity to demands of the organization and anticipated reactions of people affected by their programming action.

With problems of local people demanding Extension programs which extend beyond the mere dissemination of information on agricultural production and homemaking, agents must take stock of their job responsibilities and their competence in dealing with these responsibilities. Agents who think of themselves as technologists and who merely impose preconceived solutions to problems limit the scope of their programs. The most effective agents seem to be those who view their job as that of contributing to the objectives of the Service by dealing with complex interdisciplinary problems.

There are vast differences in the agents' sensitivity to elements inherent in their job and their interpretation of the scope of their programming responsibilities. These findings support the need for Extension administrators to view their responsibilities as including that of providing agents an opportunity to attain a high degree of personal satisfaction from their work as they contribute to the attainment of the objectives of the Service.

EXTENSION EDUCATION PROGRAMS are created and maintained to influence people to make changes in their way of living and of making a living. The existence of such programs implies that the present situation of people is not what it should and could be, that something different should prevail, and that it is possible through appropriate action to attain for them a more desirable status. From this assumption another one arises, that it is possible and feasible for a person or group of persons—officials, non-officials, or a combination of both—to identify the nature of new conditions that could and should prevail and devise means for achieving them. Hence, the entire process of Extension education implies a need for change. The question then arises: change from *what*, to *what*, by *whom*, *where*, *when*, and by *what methods?*

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